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ABSTRACT

A review of issues regarding the process of mentoring relative to the creative child or adult considers both teacher and parent roles in the process. Encouragement in the creative realm must be constructive and geared toward the individual's special needs and interests. Particular differences may be seen among mentoring processes for individuals based on such factors as age and sex. Parents and teachers who wish to mentor creative children and adults should encourage these individuals to recognize and fully use their greatest strengths and help them find other supporting individuals. Skilled insightful persons can usually recognize skilled younger persons and generally can initiate a relationship early on. The possibility of establishing professional mentors should be explored. (CB)

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MENTORING THE CREATIVE CHILD, ADULT AND PRODIGY: CURRENT KNOWLEDGE, SYSTEMS AND RESEARCH

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MENTORING THE CREATIVE CHILD, ADULT AND PRODIGY: CURRENT KNOWLEDGE, SYSTEMS AND RESEARCH

Michael F. Shaughnessy

ABSTRACT

The process of mentoring has been utilized in many fields. It has however, been most dominant in the realm of the creative arts. This paper explores the process of mentoring relative to the creative child, adult and prodigy. Our current information relative to this process will be examined as will current research. Needed areas of research are indicated for future mentors.

Why don't you work with Michelangelo? Can't you study with da Vinci? Maybe Chaucer can help you. The previous questions all reflect infinite possibilities. The opportunity to learn from an established figure has, of course, reflected the epitome of the mentoring process. However, mentoring in the creative realm differs greatly from academic and corporate mentoring. This paper will explore mentoring relative to creative children and adults and overview the state of knowledge relative to the field. This author posits that there are very succinct differences in terms of mentoring the "creatives" as opposed to other proteges. These differences are often accentuated by the nature of the creative process and by the personalities involved. Further, developmental trends of artists, musicians and others may need to be considered. Finally, emotional agendas may also need to be addressed.

MENTORING THE CREATIVE CHILD

Creative potential is often ascertained in youth. An observant parent or teacher may perceive some skill, talent, or ability not available to the average youth. Typically a haphazard referral is made, or some attempt implemented to encourage that ability. All too often those efforts fail, due to a number of reasons. However, when a creative child is linked with a supportive mentor, the results can of course be phenomenal.

Creative children, of course, present difficulties not faced by other mentors. Their zeitgeist differs, frustration tolerance is lower, long range goals, ambiguous at best! E. Paul Torrance (1984) has explored the realm of mentoring, and has also indicated relevant difficulties relative to mentoring. However, the bringing of creative potential to fruition, or at least encouraging it's growth, is, in fact, it's own reward.

The positive characteristics of a mentor have been seen to be different for males and females (Torrence, 1984). Males appear to respond to a mentor who is skilled and "an expert." They report the mentor as "a friend... encouraging, prodding and respectful." Finally, "committed, dedicated, hard working, and honest" were traits linked to the mentor. The females appear to have different traits, such as "encouraging, praising, skilled expert, a friend. inspiring and energizing." They were seen as being "supportive, a[c]knowledged talent, confidence giving, caring, interested and persisten[t]."

These differences may be due to some basic male/female differences as noted by Gilligan (1982) or perhaps due to the fact that women are still establishing themselves in positions of authority. In any case, the mentor must be regarded as a person with specific skills, encouragement being one of these skills.

Encouragement in the creative realm must be constructive and occasionally genteel. The mentor must be more cognizant of the creative child's foibles and weaknesses and combine instruction with support. Expectations must be judiciously guarded. Being a role model is tolerable; holding up another more accomplished artisan as a role model may result in dismay and discouragement.

Early identification of the "creative" child seems imperative. The research (Torrance, 1962, 1965) seems to indicate that creativity can be squashed by third or fourth grade and may never return. Mentors of children owe it to their mentees to try to arrange for a consistent pattern of mentoring for grade school children. Children, of course, do not always see teachers as mentors or the teaching process as mentoring. However, the mentor's duty is to foster the process of growth and endeavor to insure that the creative gifts are maximized.

Many schools and parents, seeking to service gifted/creative and talented children often plan a mentoring program. Cox and Daniel (1938) have offered the following germaine ideas:

1) Select a coordinator who has access to an administrator at the decision-making level.
2) Specify the purpose of the mentorship and the role of the students.
3) Elicit the support of the district superintendent, the school board, and community leaders.
4) Prepare written criteria for student selection based upon multiple indeces, not just one.
5) Develop a clear, dedensible academic credit policy. If high school credit is given, the work experience should relate directly to the course for which the credit is received.
6) Try to achieve the best mentor/student match possible. Mentors should be creative producers who will not treat the students as "go-fers."
7) Orientation seminars should be planned to acquaint students with the professional and business environments in which they will work.
8) Students should be prepared for the mentorship with related course work prior to the experience.
9) Students should be helped to develop individual goals.
10) Mentors should be asked to help evaluate each student's work.
11) The program must meet the academic needs of students. Students should be assigned required reading; they also should keep journals in which they analyze their activities and experiences (cited in Rimm and Davis, 1985, p. 148).

PARENTS AS MENTOR TO THE CREATIVE CHILD

Unfortunately, as more and more parents become aware of their children's creative strengths and potentials, the weaknesses of our educational

systems and the lack of competent mentors become increasingly apparent. Painters, sculptors and creative writing teachers are few and far between. College professors have committee work, courses to teach and advising to perform. Parents thus, have assumed greater and greater responsibility for the rearing and education of their children. This perspective has been explored by Shaughnessy and Heacock (1985) and by Shaughnessy, Neely and Azubike (1986). Essentially, in many rural areas of limited resources and few specialists, a parent must act as a mentor in terms of encouraging their children's artistic growth. Parental support groups are often found in many states and projects revolve around effective parenting and mentoring.

The "parent as mentor" position has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, the parent can grow creatively and is much more "in touch" with what their child is doing. On the other hand, role overload may result and the parent, not being "an expert" may not have the skills and abilities to truly foster the growth of the child. They may not be totally objective relative to their child's abilities. Insightful parents may recognize the "point of diminishing returns" and make adjustments eg. relocation from a rural area to an urban cultural center. They may further seek out experts and foster a mentor relationship.

MENTORING THE CREATIVE ADULT

The adult, of course, presents many more, and different challenges than the child. The rewards may also be more immediate and impressive. Further, the adult more readily seeks out a mentor for improvement of his/her work. The work can be art, music, writing or research (Shaughnessy, 1984). However, the amelioration and growth of creative work takes an entirely different dimension from that of the child.

The adult mentor is qualitatively more aware of "standards" and of the intricacies and subtleties of the creative endeavor. The teacher/pupil relationship is diminished and a more egalitarian perspective is assumed. The mentor is still the expert but the protege may see cracks in the armor. There may, in some cases, be competition. In fact, Levinson (1978) often found short abrasive masculine mentoring relationships.

Emotionally, the adult mentee has greater depth to their emotional state and this emotional depth may be a valuable strength to be called upon (Shaughnessy, 1983). Further, the adult mentor may advise their protege from a number of differing perspectives (Shaughnessy, 1984) and thus be more flexible and adaptable in their approach. E. Paul Torrance (1984) has suggested the following seven items for mentors to help creatively gifted youth:

Help them to:

1. Be unafraid of "falling in love with something" and pursue it with intensity and in depth. A person is motivated most to do the things they love and can do best.
2. Know, understand, take pride in, practice, use, exploit and enjoy

their greatest strengths.
3. Learn to free themselves from the expectations of others and to walk away from the games that others try to impose upon them.
4. Free themselves to play their own game in such a way as to make the best use of their strengths and follow their dreams.
5. Find some great teachers and attach themselves to these teachers.
6. Avoid wasting a lot of expensive, unproductive energy in trying to be well rounded.
7. Learn the skills of interdependence and give freely of the infinity of their greatest strengths (pp. 56-57).

The above can certainly be applied to young adults and older adults.

The adult may need even greater amounts of emotional support and perhaps even financial support. Familial and marital problems may hamper creative progress. The mentor must be aware of these set backs, yet consistently support and encourage the emotional growth of the protege.

MENTORING THE PRODIGY

Although few and far between, real prodigies do in fact exact and skilled professional may expect to be consulted regarding the education of said prodigies. Essentially there is little written about prodigies and even less about the process of mentoring to these children. David Feldman (1980) has written on the theoretical/developmental aspects of prodigies while Howard Gardner (1983) has written on brain research relative to prodigies and some practical educational methods, i.e. the Suzuki Talent Education Method. This author, (Shaughnessy, 1986) has endeavored to synthesize some of our notions regarding the cognitive structures of highly gifted children.

It is difficult if not impossible to discern the talent and potential which goes untapped due to lack of a willing mentor. Some issues which must clearly be discussed with parents of prodigies (and later prodigies themselves) follow:

1. Parents need to recognize their own (and early mentors) limitations and inexperience. Parents must acknowledge that if they have pursued chess as a hobby, they cannot teach him/her to be a grand master. Local "mentors" in a music shop must also realize when a child must go to attent Julliard School of Music or the Boston Conservatory.
2. Parents must be willing to relocate. Prodigies cannot flourish in Chadron, Nebraska. The stimulation of a cultural center such as Chicago, New York and San Francisco must be sought out.
3. Play must not be neglected. Children also need to play in the mud, get dirty, pitch baseball and shoot hoop periodically.
4. Expert advice must be sought out and contact maintained. Specialists are few and far between. They will, in effect, be "mentors" of sorts to parents. Their advice, recommendations and support are invaluable.
5. Don't expect overnight success. Parents must temper their expectations. Granted, a four year old playing Mozart is impressive.

However, the road to "concert pianist" is long and arduous.

6. Don't neglect other siblings and their gifts and talents. Don't create a neurotic brother or sister via constant comparing and bragging. Try to keep the family intact as a "reservoir of meaning" (Shaughnessy, 1983).

7. Although a child may have different talents, skills and abilities than others, they are no better than other less talented human beings.

At the present time there is very little research on mentoring to prodigies. There is little on the process of teaching prodigies. This seems to be a much neglected area in need of future research and investigation.

ON BECOMING A MENTOR

Many times, due to circumstances, one must become a mentor at least temporarily. There may be a dearth of capable people, indeed, there may be no one else ready, willing and able to support a younger person with potential and ability. Collins (1983) has offered the following guidelines:

1. "Don't wait to be asked."
2. Recognize that mentoring is good for oneself and for one's organization.
3. Recognize talent early.

Although her text is generally business oriented, the guidelines offered are applicable in most fields. The skilled, insightful person can usually recognize skilled younger others and generally can initiate a relationship early on.

In such situations, one is left to one's own devices to learn "on-the-job" and obtain practical experience in this manner. Mentors should be able to give of themselves emotionally. They must be able to deal with frustration and aggravation. Further, they should be careful not to use their proteges as mechanism of vicarious pleasure.

TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL MENTORING?

Facilitating the creative child's potential and growth is of course, a time consuming affair. Both the mentor and protege profit. However, as "experts" are few and far between, should we move toward the establishment of professional mentors? This writer has periodically "set up" students with mentors. Elementary and secondary high school students have benefited from their relationship with their mentor. As we become more and more aware of children's talents and abilities, and the benefits of mentoring, should we be establishing professional paid mentors?

Certainly the relationship may change. The mentor may become an outside instructor. Time constraints on professionals time are of course a reality. Experts need to be reimbursed for their expertise, yet the fiscal element may damage or change the relationship. Certainly, in some

esoteric fields it may be necessary to pay an expert for his/her specialized knowledge.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Briefly, this paper has endeavored to review some of the main issues in mentoring in creativity. Mentoring to the creative child, adult and prodigy has been cursorily reviewed. Much still needs to be done in terms of empirical research in order to maximize the benefits of the mentor/protege relationship.

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